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SUBJECT: ELUSIVE SLA COMMANDERS' CONFERENCE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) commanders conference in North Darfur remains indefinitely postponed as the various factions attempt to resolve internal differences and persuade additional key military leaders, such as former G-19 leader Adam Bakhit, to participate in the process. Several commanders continue to remain optimistic that the gathering will occur in the coming weeks and that they will succeed in forming a leadership council, which will play a principal role in a broader political conference and the selection of more coherent leadership. While security has been stable around the concentration of field commanders in North Darfur, the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) has indicated that the Sudanese government is growing leery of the conference's continued delays. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The conference in North Darfur to unite the disparate Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) non-signatory factions remains on hold pending the resolution of internal disputes and attempts to bring in key players from Chad. SLA-Non-Signatory Faction (SLA/NSF) Ceasefire Commission (CFC) representative Colonel Abdu Ismael told S/CRS Poloffs that he remains in contact with the SLA commanders in North Darfur, has informed them that they are losing credibility with the international community, and does not intend to continue to run interference for the group if they continue to delay the conference. Abdu chastised the field commanders for the numerous announcements, delays, and cancellations and said that he fears his own credibility is suffering.

¶3. (SBU) Local civil society leaders with direct connections to SLA commanders in the field say that the non-signatories are aware both of the negative perception created by the continued delays and the diminishing patience of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The SLA commanders are also attuned to "avoiding another Haskanita" that will lead to greater divisions (including along tribal lines). For that reason, they have continued to seek the involvement of key commanders such as Adam Bakhit and Saddiq Burra, who have so far favored alignment under Chadian auspices. (NOTE: The extent of contact between the commanders in North Darfur and the non-signatories in Chad remains unclear, as does the level of effort being pursued to convince them to unite under a single SLA banner. Abdu does not believe Bakhit will participate, and other contacts have indicated Darfurians' wariness of the National Redemption Front (NRF) and its connections to Chad. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) Abdu and other interlocutors contend that the conference may still occur in the coming weeks, with approximately 300 military leaders in the area near Umm Rai. Abdu explained that the field commanders had developed a format that would only exclude the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The end result of the conference, he held, would be the formation of a representative military council, which would play a principal role in a future SLA political conference and the selection of a more cohesive leadership. In the expected eight to ten week period between the commanders' conference and the broader event, the SLA would focus on restoring full humanitarian access throughout their areas of

control, according to one local civil society leader who remains in contact with field commanders. He added that this period would be used to form a Preparatory Committee to lay the groundwork for the general conference, to establish a negotiating team. Rebel commanders have already conveyed a desire to hold any future political dialogue somewhere in Europe (Norway was specifically mentioned), where Sudan's neighbors are less likely to meddle.

15. (SBU) Colonel Abdu noted no problems with security in the area where the commanders have convened in North Darfur - both because the SLA are present in force and because of the negative international backlash that would follow a SAF attack. UNDSS, however, has indicated that the GoS is "annoyed" with the delays in the non-signatories conference--which the SAF claims could be cover for an extended military strategy session--and that the possibility of armed confrontation between the groups could increase. (Note: No major clashes between Government and rebel force have occurred since early January. End note.)

HUME